

# Vietnam Generation

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## Introduction

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# INTRODUCTION

## SANDRA GURVIS

*They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears  
into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war any more.*

As I sat listening to—and repeating—those ancient words during a recent *bat mitzvah*, I was nearly moved to tears. The refrain of that old song, “When Will They Ever Learn?” echoed in my head. The United States has sent American troops to Saudi Arabia and threatens to go to war unless Saddam Hussein pulls the Iraqi army out of Kuwait. And this time I have even more to lose. I have a son.

This issue of *Vietnam Generation* tells the stories of those who’ve sacrificed—their freedom, their time, and those they love—to another far away “military action”: the American war in Vietnam. Some of America’s finest writers were damn sick of that war. Many said so in an elegant and powerful way.

The short stories, poems and personal narratives seem especially propitious. Not only because of recent developments in the Persian Gulf, but because the United States always seems to be teetering on the edge of war somewhere in the world... Grenada, Panama, Nicaragua, El Salvador.

The situations have stemmed from U.S. policy over the past four decades. Because he felt threatened by the Soviet Union after World War II, in 1947, Harry S. Truman announced a doctrine of international resistance to Communist aggression called (but of course) the Truman Doctrine. This action preceded the Containment Policy, which was later devised to suppress Communist expansion. The Containment Policy, in turn, laid the groundwork for the Eisenhower Doctrine, which approved the use of armed force to resist the advance of international Communism.

By adopting Truman’s policy and applying it in Vietnam, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon supported the notion that if one Southeast Asian nation fell to the Communists, the others would also succumb, falling like a row of dominoes.

The Berlin Wall has tumbled instead and today we find ourselves in sympathy with the Russians, who lack adequate food and toilet paper. And we have a volunteer army which, some say, is at the hot spot of the moment because it wants to be there. “Nobody was forced to go to Saudi Arabia,” commented *Newsweek’s* Tony Clifton. “And because it’s a volunteer army, there aren’t many rich and middle class kids with

watchful parents back home. It's an army drawn from poor (and cloutless) kids who joined to avoid unemployment lines, to take advantage of the GI education bill—or because they actually wanted to become soldiers.”<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps those in the latter category should have read the selections in this anthology before signing up. War is still glorified in books and movies. It's portrayed as bloody and dirty and romantic, an irresistible combination to footloose and feckless young men and women who have never seen a real human being suffer or die. It also offers young adults an easy escape from Mom, Dad, and that boring home town.

These selections depict the effects the war of my generation, the Vietnam generation, had on those people who stayed home. Originally this was to be an anthology of fiction, but somehow poetry and personal narrative found its way here too. I wanted to recapture the many viewpoints and antiwar voices of the home front. Although each war is different and each trouble spot has its own history, the lesson of Vietnam should not be forgotten: We should look long and hard at ourselves before firing the first shot.

We also need to remember the illusions of youth. Journalist Sara Davidson reflects that the ideals of the young, though sometimes naive, are born out of courage and conviction:

We thought life was free and would never run out. There were good people and bad people and we could tell them apart by a look or by words spoken in code. We were certain we belonged to a generation that was special. We did not need or care about history because we had sprung from nowhere. We said what we thought and demanded what was right.... We had glimpsed a new world where nothing would be the same and we had packed our bags.<sup>2</sup>

The Vietnam generation did help change American society, although not in a way anyone could have envisioned at that time. Headway has been made in increments, rather than through revolution. The most recent example of the influence of the Vietnam generation has been the current administration's reluctance to rush into battle and the record disparity between men and women's about whether we should go to war (the women prefer peace).

Women may also be opposed to fighting in the Middle East because they recognize that they have no rights there, that Arab females live shrouded by veils. Why should they want to defend an inherently unfair system? Black Americans reacted similarly during the Vietnam war—few were enthusiastic about fighting a “white man's war.” But there may be more to women's resistance than gender identification. Columnist Ellen Goodman recently stated, “The image from the [public opinion] poll is... of women as... wary citizens who require more and better reasons for war, who accept war only as the truly last resort. If that is true, perhaps we are not splitting from men, but leading them.”<sup>3</sup>

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Perhaps by the time my children are grandparents, swords and spears will be as obsolete as plowshares and pruning hooks. If, that is, we don't blow ourselves up in the interim.

Sandra Gurvis  
Columbus, Ohio  
December 11, 1990

<sup>1</sup> Tony Clifton, "This Time, a Winnable War," *Newsweek* (10 December 1990): 30.

<sup>2</sup> Sara Davidson, *Loose Change: Three Women of the Sixties* (New York: Doubleday) 1977: 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen Goodman, "Women on War," *Washington Post* (4 December 1990): A 17.



**Note the numbers which mark some of the standing participants. They don't indicate I.Q. or net worth. This photo, from police files, appears courtesy of Ohio State University archives.**